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THE NORTHEASTERN BORDER OF SINKIANG

The international border between the Chinese Communist province of Sinkiang and the Mongolian People's Republic is recurrently the subject of interest. Unlike Sinkiang's border with Russia on the west, the Sinkiang-Mongolia boundary, which was an internal Chinese boundary until 1921, has not been formally delimited by published treaties. The possibility of trouble along the Sinkiang-Mongolia border will continue as long as there is a chance that disagreements may arise among the governments of the USSR, Mongolia, and China that might reopen border issues such as those of the mid-1940's. A recent writer concluded that in the mid-1940's "uncertainty of border demarcation opened the door to misunderstanding, if not to deliberate provocation among Chinese, Russian, and Outer Mongolian patrols."*

Because maps of Chinese Communist origin continue to differ from Soviet maps on the location of this segment of border,** the questions remain as to whether the boundary discordances on the maps (1) reflect aggressive national policies in the area, and (2) are likely to become a source of international contention in the future. The Soviets favor a boundary interpretation that assigns the Mongolian Altai to the

* Allen S. Whiting and General Sheng Shih-ts'ai, Sinkiang: Pawn or Pivot? 1958, p. 103.

** The contemporary cartographic practice of printing adequate disclaimers of the reliability of boundary information has not always been observed in the past. Consequently, the possibility is always present that faulty mapmaking will depict a situation that does not reflect the intent of the governments involved and from which they may find it embarrassing to retreat.

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Mongolian People's Republic and follows the watershed between Sinkiang and Mongolia very closely. Among themselves, available Soviet maps vary within relatively narrow limits in a zone probably not more than 50 kilometers wide.* These discrepancies seem to reflect successive advances in topographic knowledge and cartographic depiction of the area rather than any actual changes in recognition of boundary claims in the area.

The Chinese, both Nationalists and Communists, would push the traditional border between Sinkiang and Western Mongolia (inherited from the Ch'ing Dynasty) northeastward to take in large, sparsely occupied areas in which Kazakhs are predominant.** The Chinese Communists show a tendency to be somewhat less "cartographically aggressive" than the Nationalists in this area.

The Chinese maps of the Sinkiang-Mongolia boundary are more suspect than the Soviet maps that are available for comparison. Chinese maps before 1943 -- as represented by the 1938 provisional series at 1:1,000,000 -- and Chinese Communist maps since 1954 show roughly

* An anonymous American observer in 1944, however, reportedly saw a 1940 Soviet map that placed the Sinkiang-Mongolia boundary farther west than on 1927 Russian maps. This may account for the discrepancy of 86,000 square kilometers mentioned by a Chinese Nationalist official in 1947, which involved disagreements in Russian maps of approximately those dates.

** Once-legitimate traditional Chinese claims to areas in the Mongolian Altai that are inhabited by the Western Mongols (before the later spread of the Kazakhs eastward) rested upon a special relationship between the Western Mongols and the Manchu Dynasty. These claims, however, have been rendered increasingly obsolete by political evolution among the Mongols, which has destroyed the old traditional ties, and by much turmoil among the Kazakhs who have been on the move for several decades.

similar boundary alignments that result in a discrepancy of about 36,000 square kilometers when compared with Soviet maps. The 1943 revision of the 1:1,000,000 series, however, incorporates additional parts of the Mongolian Altai into the Chinese province of Sinkiang by moving large sectors of the border eastward. This cartographic appropriation of Mongolian territory apparently took place at about the time that the military governor of Sinkiang, Sheng Shih-ts'ai, switched allegiance from the USSR to Nationalist China. During this same period, similar cartographic expansionism was also encountered in other poorly defined border areas in western and southwestern China, reflecting the Chinese Nationalist Government's interest in extending its control over those areas. In late 1953 the boundary shown on Chinese Communist maps was again shifted westward -- in relatively close agreement to the 1938 alignment. At the same time, Chinese "cartographic claims" were also reduced in other disputed border areas.

Although the only maps available for boundary study are Russian and Chinese, the border problem is essentially one for the Chinese and Mongolians to settle among themselves, and will become of wider international importance only if the USSR is forced to take a stand in favor of one side or the other.

For the present, discrepancies between Chinese Communist and Soviet versions of the Sinkiang-Mongolia border are not likely to be important enough to become the subject of prolonged hard bargaining between the Chinese and the Mongolians. Under pre-Communist conditions the continuing competitions between Mongols and Kazakhs for grazing lands would

have meant perpetuation of the traditional local problem of drawing a border to suit the inhabitants. With the current trend toward greater discipline and restrictions on the nomadic way of life, conflicts along the borders will become less and less likely and can probably be settled quietly between the local or national governments concerned. Unless the border is adjudicated and demarcated, however, trouble may arise in the future as a result of growth of population, relaxation of discipline, or the vagaries of weather cycles -- a succession of good years driving the Mongols southward or a succession of bad years driving the Kazakhs eastward. The USSR would appear to have little incentive to declare itself on the matter unless the border becomes a source of prolonged disagreement between China and Mongolia or unless Sino-Soviet relations worsen to a degree that makes the Sinkiang-Mongolia border strategically important.